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TURKEY, NATO, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DAVID F. HERR, USMC

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

TURKEY, NATO, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

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Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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ABSTRACT

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➤The territorial integrity and sovereignty of Turkey have been and will continue to be the prime motivators of Ankara's political policy. Although there have been changes in the relative international balance of power over the last three decades, the ties between Turkey and her allies remain quite secure. This essay focuses on the evolution of relations between Turkey and NATO, the continuing strife between Turkey and Greece, and the reorientation of Turkish policy toward the Middle East. The majority of information was drawn from contemporary periodicals and serves to support the continued military and economic assistance to Turkey for NATO's direct benefit.

TURKEY, NATO, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Thirty-four years after Turkey's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, many of the strategic and regional realities that provided the backdrop for her membership still exist. There have been certain changes in the international balance of power and political dilemmas have pulled at the seams of the alliance, but the ties between Turkey and her allies are nonetheless quite secure. This essay will explore the evolution of relations between Turkey and NATO, the continuing strife between Turkey and Greece, and the new emphasis in Turkish policy toward the Middle East.

Turkey Joins NATO

Although not a direct participant in World War II, Turkey was nevertheless faced with pressures which ran counter to her quest for territorial integrity and sovereignty.¹ Turkey's paramount concern was her own security. It was because of this concern for her security that Turkey maintained an army of a half a million in 1939 and still groped for the additional security which could only be provided through a coalition or an alliance.² Turkey's entry into NATO on 18 February 1952 was the culmination of a long search for added security.

With World War II on the horizon, Turkey desired an



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alliance with France and Britain in order to strengthen her security. After a relatively brief period of negotiations, a mutual aid agreement was concluded among France, Britain, and Turkey in Ankara during October 1939.³ Turkey hoped to complement this agreement with another one to be concluded with the Soviet Union, however, the events which followed produced skepticism in Ankara rather than assurance.

When Turkey and the Soviet Union began negotiations in September 1939, the Soviets pushed aside a draft agreement and rather assertively offered a draft which would have altered the effect of the Montreux Convention on the Turkish Straits. The Soviet alternative would have resulted in the joint control of the Turkish Straits--an idea totally unacceptable to Turkey. Although Turkey obviously rebuffed the Soviet demand, she was, as a consequence of her dealings with the Soviets, very apprehensive about her security during the war years.⁴

Persistence appears to have been a Soviet trait. After the war had ended, the Soviet Union demanded that Turkey's frontiers be changed in favor of the Soviets; that the Soviet Union be granted a base for the joint defense of the Turkish Straits; and that an agreement of principle concerning the Montreux Convention be concluded. As added incentive, the Soviet Union repudiated that part of the Turco-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression of 1925 which stipulated inter alia that neither would attack the other. The significance of this repudiation was clear and Turkey's

anxiety increased.⁵

Developments that occurred in several areas of the world at the end of the war led President Truman in March 1947 to give aid to Turkey and Greece--a decision which in part became known as the Truman Doctrine.⁶ This assistance served notice that the United States was not indifferent to those in need, but provided no real security for Turkey's frontiers.

During the period from 1948-1951, Turkey became more and more adamant and vocal in her quest for an alliance. Although Turkey was not invited to participate in the preparatory studies which served as a prelude to the North Atlantic Treaty, Turkey firmly stated her desire to become a member of the Mediterranean Pact which was anticipated early in 1949 to complement the original alliance.⁷ Turkey took the position that European security could not be satisfied until NATO was supplemented by a Mediterranean Pact. The Turkish government emphasized that the failure to recognize this fact would result in Turkey's shift away from the West toward neutrality.

After the North Atlantic Treaty was signed on 4 April 1949, there was, however, no sense of urgency on the western diplomatic scene for the formulation of the Mediterranean Pact. This apparent indifference served to heighten the feeling of insecurity in Turkey, especially in view of the renewed demands from the Soviets regarding the Turkish Straits and Bulgaria's threat to send over 200,000 Bulgars of Turkish origin to Turkey in order to stir up trouble. The new Turkish government which came to power as a result of the elections in

May 1950 decided immediately to increase the tempo of Turkey's initiatives to join NATO. On all forums, Turkey publicly advertised her desire to formally align herself with the western free world and continued to stress the essentiality of collective security. The Turkish government felt that her membership in NATO would produce a moral obligation on the part of the United States to provide support in the face of any aggression and that military aid would naturally be increased as a result of this moral responsibility.⁸

Turkey's admission to the Council of Europe in 1949, her democratic elections in 1950, and her commitment of 4,500 troops in support of the United Nations' effort in Korea all served to increase support for Turkey's entry into NATO. In essence, the diplomats and the politicians began to view Turkey as a military asset rather than as a liability. Even the western press shifted in favor of Turkey's entry into NATO.

The new position of the United States, now in support of Turkey's entry into NATO, was not without opposition. Britain, who wished to retain command of the Middle East defense including her bases in Egypt, voiced her objections and was later joined by France. What followed were heated exchanges between Britain and Turkey and indecision on the part of the Atlantic Council. Some member nations were afraid that the Turkish membership proposal would provoke the Soviets, while others were concerned with the over extension of the NATO geographical area itself.⁹

In the final analysis, Turkey's entry into NATO revolved around two issues. First, who should be given command of the Eastern Mediterranean and secondly, what would constitute Turkey's contribution to the defense of the Middle East. After lengthy discussions among Turkey, Britain, and the United States, it was resolved that definitive answers to these issues should not impede Turkey's entry into NATO. It was agreed by the end of July 1951 that Turkey's value to NATO outweighed the political concerns of the moment. Finally, the Protocol of Accession was signed by the Atlantic Council on 22 October 1951 which led to Turkey's full integration into the alliance. Turkey's goal had been attained; her immediate security needs had been satisfied.¹⁰

Turkey and Greece

Although certainly not the only problem within NATO, the continuing strife between Turkey and Greece threatens the integrity of the southern region which is essential for the defense of Europe. This friction between allies shakes the very foundation of the alliance. Coupled with the growth of Soviet military power within the area, the accompanying political intimidation, and the spillover of turmoil from the Middle East, the situation is indeed exacerbated and begs for resolution.¹¹

The sources of tension between Turkey and Greece are both numerous and complex. From a historical perspective, the two

countries differ vastly in both culture and religion--the Greeks being Christians of the Orthodox faith and the Turks Moslems. This religious difference is compounded by an even greater disparity in temperament. Although some regard the Greeks as intellectual romantics and the Turks as pragmatists, their descriptions of each other are even more basic. In essence, the Greeks regard the Turks as "bullies," and the Turks regard the Greeks as "cheats." These rather descriptive characterizations have been reinforced in successive generations in both Greece and Turkey through propaganda and education. In fact, history books, especially the Greek texts, are full of questionable historical interpretations, which in the opinion of many westerners, graphically depict the real enemy as the one across the Aegean.¹²

From a contemporary standpoint, Cyprus and the Aegean are the main points of contention between Turkey and Greece.¹³ Although the issues relating to the Aegean are largely technical, both issues--Cyprus and the Aegean--embody political concepts of supreme national importance: the ideas of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Let us first look at the most urgent problem regarding the settlement of the Cyprus conflict.

The decade of peace in Cyprus which began in 1964 with the establishment of a United Nations' force on the island came to an abrupt end in July 1974. The coup which overthrew the Makarios government resulted in a chaotic situation and a subsequent appeal by the Turkish Cypriots to Turkey for

support. During July and August 1974, the Turkish army occupied the northern part of the island sending over 200,000 Greek Cypriots fleeing as refugees and welcoming Turkish Cypriots who fled the southern portion of the island. By the end of August, forty percent of the island was under Turkish control to uphold the rights of less than twenty percent of the population. After this de facto partition, a solution was left to negotiations which are still ongoing today.¹⁴

The Greeks regarded Turkey's action as an "invasion," whereas the Turks described their occupation as "an effort for peace and freedom." We in the U.S. used the phrase "military intervention" to describe the affray.¹⁵ The political ramifications of Turkey's overt action were significant. Both the Greeks and the Turks felt betrayed by the United States. The Greeks thought that the Turks could have been held in check by the Americans and the Turks questioned the credibility of the alliance because of the dramatic impact--materially and psychologically--created by the U.S. arms embargo which was initiated in July 1975. For Turkey, the arms embargo eliminated any distinction between friends and enemies. The unique confidence that was felt by the Turkish people about their U.S. friendship suffered serious degradation. The arms embargo also did great harm to Turkey's armed forces.¹⁶

By the late 1970s, Turkey was unable to import even the minimum of her arms needs. The embargo precipitated the subsequent decision in Ankara to suspend U.S. operations at

the military installations in Turkey. This development made explicit the fact that access to facilities was directly related to decisions on military assistance.¹⁷

The analysis of the issues by the U.S. and Turkey focused on fundamental assumptions and even questioned the value of continuing the special relationship. The Greeks and their supporters were elated and openly claimed that Turkey deserved the punishment. The real victim, however, was NATO because of the chasm between two member nations and the possibilities for exploitation by the Soviet Union.¹⁸

In search of a resolution for the Cyprus dilemma, Turkey has emphasized the need for intercommunal talks as the only viable method for satisfactory negotiations which could lead to a mutually acceptable and lasting peace in Cyprus. On the other hand, Greece has long favored the internationalization of the conflict.¹⁹

Recently the Secretary General of the United Nations presented a draft agreement which outlined a solution to the Cyprus problem to Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot representatives. The draft proposal is a slightly different version than the one which was presented in February 1985 in that it suggests the establishment of a united Cypriot government containing two autonomous states. If the draft were adopted by both the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders, the proposal could then serve as a basis for further negotiations concerning the withdrawal of Turkish troops, the resettlement of refugees, and the guaranteeing of the peace.

The Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot responses should be forthcoming in the immediate future.²⁰

The Aegean has long been a bone of contention between Turkey and Greece. During the years of negotiations each side has been unwilling to concede anything which could be interpreted as ceding sovereignty of the Aegean Sea, or the airspace above it. Much of the consternation concerning the Aegean stems from the instinctive feeling of most Greeks that the Aegean is a Greek lake because of the numerous Greek islands contained therein. Although more restrained now when compared to several years past, the Greek Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreu, often cultivates this feeling in his political rhetoric. To the Turks this notion is absurd from a logical and rational point of view and from the perspective of international law. Although there are many aspects to the Aegean problem, the subsequent discussion will center on three of the more significant issues: territorial waters, the continental shelf, and Aegean airspace.²¹

To both Greece and Turkey, the issue of territorial waters is a vital element of the delicate balance of interests in the Aegean. Currently, both countries still observe the six-mile limit in the Aegean, the common international standard which was adopted by most maritime countries over sixty years ago. In addition, both Greece and Turkey have no problem in applying the same six-mile limit to the Aegean islands. The problem is that the Greek government has continued to verbally assert its right to extend territorial waters unilaterally

from the current six-mile limit to twelve miles. The results of such an extension would be to increase Greek territorial waters by nearly thirty percent, a compensatory reduction in the existing high seas by nearly thirty percent, with the Turks only gaining a little over one percent in their territorial waters. The Turkish government has emphasized that such a change would be totally unacceptable--a cause for war. Fortunately, the Greek position has been characterized by rhetoric rather than action. Many analysts find the situation a little strange, especially since Turkey herself has extended her territorial waters in the Black Sea to the twelve-mile limit. But, according to the Turkish government, their extension in this particular case does not constitute "an abuse of right" as defined by the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea.²²

The second Aegean issue is the dispute over the continental shelf. Without making the problem too complex, the position of the Greek government is based on the premise that islands as well as any continental mainland possess a continental shelf. The Greeks base their claim on the Geneva Convention of 1958 which was concluded under the auspices of the United Nations. The Turks, however, are not signators of that Convention for rather obvious reasons. Because there are over 2,000 Greek islands in the Aegean, the total acceptance of the relevant article in the Convention would theoretically give the Greeks sovereign rights to exploit most of the Aegean seabed deposits.²³

From the Turkish standpoint, the continental shelf is an extension of the Anatolian mainland. Consequently, Turkey's continental shelf would extend, according to this hypothesis, to the west of those Greek islands along the Turkish coast. At the same time, sovereign rights to exploit the seabed around these islands would extend no further than the current territorial waters limit--six miles. Whether the Aegean contains any minerals or other deposits that would be economically feasible to extract remains an unknown factor. From all appearances, the continental shelf dispute appears to again focus on the principle of sovereignty. The Turks have felt that because of the special circumstances within the Aegean, an equitable solution to the existing dispute could only be found through bilateral negotiations. The Greeks quite naturally have repeatedly noted their dislike for bilateral negotiated settlements as evidenced by their referral of the continental shelf dispute to the International Court of Justice at The Hague and to the United Nations Security Council. In both instances, bilateral negotiations were recommended.²⁴

Probably the hottest issue in the Aegean is the quarrel over the airspace above the Greek Aegean islands, especially those islands which are situated near the Turkish coast. On this issue, the Greek government takes the position that her Aegean islands possess ten miles of airspace, rather than the normal six miles which corresponds with her territorial waters. Turkey flatly rejects Greece's claim of a ten-mile

zone. The Turks regard Greece's unilateral assertion of a ten-mile air corridor as legally invalid. Consequently, the Turks periodically dispatch jets to reinforce their objections to the Greek position. Several moratoriums have been put in effect over the years, but a final resolve on this issue remains pending.²⁵

Turkey and the Middle East

The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 from the remains of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal, later called Kemal Ataturk, was elected as the Republic's first president. Under his leadership, programs were instituted which served to reorganize the Republic and create a regionally independent Turkish nation. His reforms crossed the entire social, political, and economic spectrums. Some of the forced changes broke cultural and religious traditions, which had according to Kemal Ataturk, restrained development and the "civilization" of the Turkish society. As a consequence of this westernization and inherent desire for modernization, Turkey aligned herself with the nations of the western free world and showed little interest in regional affairs. Of late, however, there has been a philosophical reorientation and a growing interest and concern by Turkey for the Middle East.²⁶ The final portion of this essay will examine this change of direction and analyze several of the possible implications.

Turkey's initial drive for modernization left little room for regional interests. Bilateral negotiations with Iraq in the mid-1920s and with Syria in the late 1930s to settle territorial disputes and the conclusion of a nonaggression treaty, the Saadabat Pact, with Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan in 1937 constituted the few regional political dealings. Although Turkey tried to maintain cordial relationships with all her Middle Eastern neighbors during these early years, there was not much assistance to be gained from the region which could have aided with the directed modernization within Turkey.²⁷

Prior to and after World War II, Turkey vigorously pursued relations with the West in search of adequate security which would ensure her territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of the existing Soviet threat. Although Turkey did not intend to offend her Arab neighbors, the close ties which developed between Turkey and the western nations certainly did not enhance feelings of Arab unity. The Arab nations felt that Turkey was turning her back on them--that Turkey was breaking away from Islam. Turkey and the other Arab nations also had a very different perception of the Soviets. The Turkish, of course, viewed the Soviets as the primary threat--a potential aggressor--and her Arab neighbors did not share the same view. Most of the other Arab nations were predisposed to increasing ties with the Soviet Union as a means of counterbalancing American influence within the region and registering an objection against Israel.²⁸

Turkey's interest in Middle Eastern regional affairs remained at a relatively low ebb during the 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, certain events occurred which precipitated changes in the way that Turkey looked at the global and regional political scenes. First, President Johnson sent a curt letter to the Turkish Prime Minister in 1964 which was received with shock and dismay. The President indicated that the U.S. would not condone Turkey's use of U.S. military equipment in Cyprus. Even more traumatic for the Turks, the letter emphasized that NATO might not defend Turkey in the event of Soviet aggression provoked by Turkish military involvement in Cyprus. As if this were not enough, the U.S. arms embargo imposed in 1975 seemed to add the crowning blow. Turkish-U.S. relations hit an all time low.²⁹ As a result of these political crises, Turkey began a gradual movement away from total dependence on the West. The Reagan administration has done much to nurture U.S.-Turkish relations since 1981 and has, in part, restored much of Turkey's lost confidence. The momentum of the earlier years, however, has not yet been recovered.

It is obvious that Turkish foreign policy underwent somewhat of a reorientation during and after the difficult years with the U.S., but President Johnson's letter and the arms embargo were not the only catalysts. The increases in Soviet military power, especially naval and sea power, has clearly enhanced Soviet influence in the Middle East. While this fact may seem inconsequential to many, Turkey borders the

Soviet Union and in time of war would be dependent on her sea lines of communications in the Mediterranean for resupply.³⁰

Prior to the 1960s, the Mediterranean Sea could have been referred to by the U.S. Navy as our lake: the U.S. presence was dominant. However, the Soviet Union began a permanent presence in 1964, and currently has a sizable squadron which includes submarines deployed in the Mediterranean. The Soviets have also improved the sustainment capability of their Mediterranean forces. Malta, once closely aligned with the West and NATO, has been providing the Soviets with maritime facilities since the 1970s. In addition to these developments, the Soviet Union has made substantial progress in outflanking NATO's southern region. The cooperation between the Soviet Union and Moammar Khadafy's regime in Libya is but one example.³¹ These changes in the military balance of power caused Turkey to rethink her attitude toward the Soviet Union. In essence, Turkey adopted a non-provocative attitude--one of necessary regional coexistence.

Many of Turkey's domestic problems of the 1970s were fueled by the poor performance of her economy. The economic realities of high unemployment compelled Turkey to make better use of its industrial infrastructure and to look eastward for the expansion of markets. The Turkish government has made much progress in this area. By 1983, Turkey's exports to the Islamic world rose to forty-nine percent--an increase of nearly twenty-five percent over a period of just four years. Construction contracts with the Arab community, particularly

with Libya and Saudi Arabia, have also enhanced Turkey's economic development. These contracts have served to not only employ many Turks, but also boost the export of all related construction materials.³²

Turkey is not isolated from the impact of the world oil situation. Because Turkey can satisfy only sixteen percent of her own oil needs, she is heavily dependent on the Persian Gulf nations for the import of oil for the functioning of her economy. As a consequence, the fluctuations in oil prices have a tremendous impact on the Turkish economy. These economic ties and concerns have brought Turkey closer to her Arab neighbors.³³

The military, economic, and political realities within the Middle East have produced changes in Turkey's direction. Turkey's approach today includes noninterference in regional disputes and the support for negotiated solutions to regional conflicts. By economic necessity, Turkey pursues closer relations with all Arab countries, including those which differ drastically in their political orientation. Turkey has undergone a metamorphosis to ensure her own survival.

Conclusion

Although it is true that there have been numerous global and regional changes over the last three decades, Turkey's political future remains with the West. The Soviet threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Turkey remains

real and must be countered by Turkey's only option--her affiliation with NATO.

From the U.S.-NATO perspective, Turkey's geopolitical importance has increased over the years. As a consequence, it would appear prudent to continue the emphasis on the modernization of both the Turkish armed forces and Turkish military facilities. This modernization, however, must be done in consonance with Greece and not apart from the government in Athens. Turkey and Greece must be viewed as two sides of the same NATO coin--both are essential for the defense of the southern region.

We in the West should encourage Turkey's economic expansion with her Arab neighbors which is so important for her domestic economy. Future relations with Turkey should show U.S.-NATO resolve and provide the necessary assistance to enhance Turkey's economic and military posture.

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